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MATRIMONY

BY

JOHN TREVENA

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JOHN TREVENA

Henderson, Ernest George

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NOTE

Matrimony is not a story, but an attempt to reproduce the marriage service of the mediaeval church.

J. T.

MATRIMONY

BETROTHAL..... 11

BLESSING OF THE RING..... 23

SOLEMNISATION..... 29

BENEDICTION..... 39

THE KISS..... 47

THE NIGHT..... 53

BETROTHAL

BETROTHAL

THERE was always a civilization of the heart. Cultivated fields might be few, houses be mean, a gibbet stand upon the hill, the black death rage, but where a few were gathered together there would be love: in any age, even the darkest: in any place, even Widdecombe in the cold country: in the time of plague and superstition, in the time of oppression and fear of kings, in the time of ignorance, fighting often, and exposure to all the wild winds, in the time of squalor, God would not go. All that we know of these people of the past is that they were ruled by the heart, and there was little of happiness in their lives but love. Their manners would have been strange to us, and we should have understood no word of their rough dialect. Therefore we may only translate their feelings, which we know were the same as ours, into the language we can speak and read.

Straight and tall as now, but then new, rose the tower from Widdecombe church-town. The village had emptied itself into the church, for it was early morning, Mass time, and Sir Robert Mareschall was late. It was only a weekday, no festival, yet the church was full, and strange savages from the moor, unbelieving and yet desiring protection, knelt in the porch. Do not forget this was the age of darkness, when men came to church because they knew no better. The eyes of all were upon the pyx, suspended in the form of a dove from a chain above the high altar, before it a red light, behind it the crucifix. All things were in order, nothing costly, for Widdecombe was not wealthy, but all the vessels and vestments were worthy, very different from the neighbouring parish of Ashburton where the pyx was made of wood and had no lock, the Nuptial Veil was ragged, the Missal was

rotten and moth-eaten, and there was not even an image of the blessed patron saint. Every child in Widdecombe knew what a goodly vessel held the incense in their church, how beautiful the Holy Chrism, how perfect the Graduale and the Antiphonale, how fine the linen cloths; and as for the vestments, had they not stared often at Sir Robert's festival cope fastened by gorgeous morse, which they had no doubt at all was a finer jewel than any of the King's.

Henry, the eighth of his royal name, the God-hater, was not yet born. The church was still free and everywhere the centre of life and love; and the priests, bearing the courtesy title of "Sir," were then the fathers of their people. Imagination could not easily exaggerate the glories of that church, the splendor or pathos of its ceremonies. The magnificence of its architecture may be guessed by the sight of the Abbey at Westminster, a small, mean building in comparison with the Abbey Churches of Reading, Glastonbury, Fountains, and many another, which were to be destroyed by that incarnation of evil who was to bring a stain upon the throne forever. The age of doubt was far away, nor was there any prophet to foretell the horrors of the Reformation. There was peace at little Widdecombe in the moor.

Yet in the church was a sound like brawling. Men were very ignorant and earnest. The sun was high above the tors, and each man had his daily toil awaiting, but could not go to it until he had received the blessing and had seen his God made upon the altar. There were voices and mutterings almost savage, and when Sir Robert appeared from the vestry and slowly mounted to the holy place, they broke out. The men were rough, wild with excitement and some terror, lest their priest should have lost the power to bring God down.

"Haste, Sir Robert, haste!" they cried aloud; and some stood up and held their arms out.

"My horses wait. Hold up my God that I may see Him."

"Father!" cried a man, "I have far to go this day. I must look on Jesus Christ before I go."

"Peace, my children," said Sir Robert; and began the Mass.

Those whose duties were urgent departed after the Elevation, secure for that day against witches and the power of the devil: many remained to the end, among them a girl and boy, a fair couple, lately betrothed, although neither had reached the age of twenty, but folk married young in those days, children in face and children in beauty, Anthonie Byland and Petronel Layne. They were to be married when the priest thought fitting.

As Sir Robert came out of the church they joined him, one on each side, and walked on, with hands holding his, like children with their father, towards his house. The priest was not learned, and he talked a dialect which we should not comprehend — even the great men of Lydford or Exeter town spoke much the same — and he wrote a letter with exceeding difficulty, finding many different ways of spelling his name, recorded for us as Mareschall which we should render to-day by Marshall; but he was a holy man, always on the side of the Widdecombe tinners against the Court of Stannary — had not the tower of his church, still accounted one of the most beautiful in England, been built as a labour of love by these same tinners? — always in communion with his people and knowing their troubles before even they brought them to him.

"Father," said Anthonie, "shall we not be married very soon? 'Tis hard to wait."

"Nay, child, ha' patience," said the old man, pretending to be gruff. "Why, 'twas only a year or two agone, as it seems, I purified thy mother for bearing thee, and as for this young maiden —"

"Father, I am sixteen," cried Petronel.

"Od's pitikins, maid, was it not last Invention o' the Holy Rood thy god-sibs brought thee to the door o' church, and when I spake in the words of the office, 'Quid petis — what seekest thou?' thy father answered, 'Baptismum,' and I raised thee in my arms, and most horribly thou didst howl?"

"Father, father! It was long years ago."

"Longer than thou canst mind. And now thou wouldst be wed. Where is the ring, my Anthonie?"

"I will ride my pony into Ayspertone town, and buy it of the silver-merchant there."

"Returning, child, the wild Gubbins will set about and take it from thee."

"I would break their heads with my cudgel and ride over them."

Sir Robert looked at the young lovers tenderly, pressing a hand of each to his side. Life hung upon a thread, any day it might be cut by the sword of violence or broken by the arrow of pestilence; from the sword he, as a priest, was safe, but he knew that when Anthonie went to Ashburton for the ring, the black death might return with him, or he might be drawn into some quarrel and not return at all. It was an age when the fear of death was ever-present, when young people were eager for the Nuptial Mass, to secure their short-lived happiness, knowing too well that the Mass for the dead might follow soon.

"The season of Advent is near," said Sir Robert gravely. "Then cometh Epiphany and the cold weather, and after that the forty days. The Church does not love a winter's bride. Then cometh May, Petronel."

"The maypole and the flower-dance. I was queen two years ago."

"Thou shalt be queen again, queen of thy husband and his home. The last day of the month is the festival of thy patron, child, Petronilla, virgin and not martyr, even as thou art.

There are nocturnes at midnight and daybreak, for the feast falls within the Octave of Holy Trinity, and thou shalt bring flowers for the holy place, my maid."

"Thou wilt bless us then, Father?" cried Anthonie.

"June, child, June," said Sir Robert hastily. "I do not love a May marriage."

It seemed a long wait for the lovers: through the rest of autumn, the stretch of winter, and much of spring. It seemed to them a penance for sins they had not committed, but Sir Robert was wise. It was not well for a young couple to start the new life near winter, with the storms and cold weather to try them. June was the time for a bride to blush, a time for love, when nature unaided would make the home lovely, and each green oak would become a tree of heaven. It was good for them to wait a little, to feel the trials of the cold country bringing them nearer, knitting their souls together in a miraculous way, so that neither could laugh without an echo, or sigh without answer; and when the frost and snow had departed, and the time of probation was over, they would kneel beneath the Nuptial Veil, and be welded joint by joint in body as in soul. Their earthly parents claimed them only for daily duties. Now that they were betrothed their spiritual father, Sir Robert, and their spiritual mother, the Church, had full control over the lives of Anthonie and Petronel.

So the winter came, as it must, dark and somewhat awful, and the lovers were frightened. There was a horror upon them as of the end of things; and they drew closer like children in the night, passing along hand in hand, speaking brave words to encourage one another, while the winds howled about them, and the waters roared, and everything seemed to be dead except love. Sir Robert watched them, and was glad, knowing that their hearts were right; and each week, on a cold dark morning in the church of little Widdecombe in the wind, he said a Mass for their welfare, murmuring in

secret, "We receiving this Sacrament of our everlasting salvation, entreat thy mercy, O Lord, that by it Thou wouldst preserve Thy servants, Anthonie and Petronel, from all adversity." That kindly love of the Mother and Father welled from the altar and reached the children; and yet they were frightened, for the country would not live.

"It is not the time of death," said Sir Robert. "It is the time of birth."

They could not understand him, for it was December. They walked beneath the naked trees, feeling that they must keep together or they would be lost. Why was Nature so prodigal of her charms in spring, so miserly in those days which seemed to belong to no season at all? It would have been so easy for the God of life to have appointed a Sacrament of winter, a new miracle which might have sprinkled the wood and spotted the fields with as many flowers as in May, frost-resisting things like the snowdrop, which being white, asks for no sunshine. There was impatience in that question when they saw the nakedness of the land, shuddering and pulling sheets of cold water over its body for shame, murmuring, "Do not look at me now." Nature seemed bankrupt: she could not pay for even one hour of sunshine every day; and the holy marriage tie was being violated, as it seemed; the solemn union between God and the earth was in danger of dissolution; a writ of divorce had issued; a few more of those intolerable showers of ice must surely establish the decree, unless some divine attorney from the spiritual court should intervene. Sir Robert and the Church were after all powerless; they could not offer up a Mass which by its magic should make the trees burst into leaf and restore their sun to them.

If there was to be no more matrimony, what then? If the holiest bond of all was broken, what hope for lovers? The spiritual parents knew nothing of divorce; that was in the hands of the Holy Father, who was as much outside the world

of hearts and kisses as God Himself. But with these fears Sir Robert came and walked with the children, often in body, sometimes in spirit, pointing out to them what they had missed; and by the virtue of his eyes their own were opened.

Who was this riding through the wood upon a goat, amid a shower of brown leaves, with a face as bright as a berry, who but the spirit of winter — not the old cripple December, not the wreck of the year, old, worn-out time, with broken and dinted rubbish of hour-glass and scythe, a white wisp of hair streaming across his lantern-jaws; but the immortal spirit of the resurrection, a being of child-like eagerness and soft eyes? Here was no old Nestor, croaking of past days, but Robin Goodfellow; no quack with some celestial tincture to make the old young again, but a merry fellow looking forward, a laughing fellow, without whom Nature would be lost; everything that fell to the ground to rest a little, feigning death like a cunning beast, pleading it as an excuse for idleness, would for lack of that laughing spirit take more than the outward image of death, would not germinate, and a cold seal would be placed upon that spot whence life must issue.

The children, walking after Benediction in the wood, felt the presence of this glad spirit, and as they clung together heard him speak, just as Sir Robert spoke, when it was time for muttering, as the little bell tinkled, and the incense hid him in a fog:

"You call me winter, lovers. I am the good physician. I remove old growths and deliver the branches of buds. With my gales I amputate diseased limbs, rubbing in my frost to prevent decay. With my snow I purify the soil. And when my work is done I go a-mumming, with a wreath of holly round my head, and wherever I pass the rowan-wood is flung upon the fire, and I hear folk say, 'It is the beginning, not the end.'"

The light was going out, the darkness increased, the

waters were rising. The lovers trembled because the world seemed fiercer, and matrimony was, like heaven, far away. And yet never had the heaven looked so near. The atmosphere was clear with frost; they could see Orion striding across the sky, and great Sirius, sun of winter. Their eyes were opened, and they saw things which were a great way off.

"Spring is my son," went on the muttering. "He shirks his work, comes to it late, and often puts it off until to-morrow; but he never fails lovers, for when I frighten him with frost, he grows serious, and comes along the wood whistling with a warm west wind. Here is what I leave to him — all that I have. Life, lovers! New life!"

The children were beginning to understand. Here was no bequest of dead wood, but life, young life, like their own. The bareness of the beginning resembled the nakedness of the end, although there was neither beginning nor end. In the alphabet of time Aleph the ox wears the yoke of the long O: the two ends are lost in one circle, so that no man shall take an hour, nor yet a day, and say, "here we begin," or, "here we end." This winter god was the herald of the resurrection, and all that followed was part of rough December, proceeding out of the strength of his days, his darkness, and his storms.

The lovers heard the noise upon the moor and within the wood. As they walked they found waters in flood, mists hanging low, the wind beating ash against oak, dead leaves sweeping down the slopes, the light ghastly, the world breaking. Emptiness, desolation, decay; and all life departing in a whirlwind.

And yet it was not so; now at last they knew it was not so, because their love was higher. Life was returning in that whirlwind. That noise which they heard around was no dirge, but the march of God in triumph. It was the sound

of His water-pipes and wind rejoicing over the conquest of death. This noise was to arouse the sleeping plants, the winds were to shake the slumbering trees into life again. Winter thundered, and shouted "Awake!" and each stirred a little and opened a bud to answer.

The lovers could not see the soil out of which the oak-tree grew, because of the mantle of russet leaves. In them was a form of death, but they were not dead; they melted into the earth and nourished the roots which gave the tree strength to bear green again. Fruit also was among the leaves, acorns, some green, some brown, and the delicate cups which they had grown from. They saw what they called the nakedness of the tree, the bareness of the boughs; and then, at the word of Benediction, the mist and the rain-cloud passed, and the twigs growing at the level of their eyes were clothed, covered with infant buds, brown every one, small and willing to burst into green clusters when the call came. These rustling leaves, which the tree had put off, even as a man throws his threadbare cloak from him and takes another, these green fingers which caught at the breezes and caressed sunbeams, were sent to the ground, not by any process of death, but by the gradual birth and rising of the bud beneath; they were cast off by life; and now the lovers saw that life throbbing upon every tree in a host of buds which could not be numbered, all silent as yet in the midst of the tumult, because the time of matrimony had not yet come.

And at last there was allowed a day as young as April: not warm, for there was a frost on the other side of the sunshine, but coloured like a Missal-page, water-colours all, no hot and thick September oils, but liquid stuff, dripping, nothing stagnant, faint blue turning into grey on the sky-line, and pink cherubic lip pouting at the edge of the clouds. A rare colour that pink, and easy to remember. On such a day Anthonie and Petronel descended from the heights, where snow lay

unbroken, but below not a flake; and as they came into a rough brake, where the bracken of the year that had been was crumpled in its rusty death, they stopped, conscious both of color that was music. Behind them the sun, in front a bush of holly on fire with berries and sunset; nothing more. One bush of holly among hundreds, and yet something was there they had never seen before; a glory, a transfiguration; the bush burnt and was not consumed. During those few moments every sense was satisfied, nothing more was needed, no other ceremony, no more Sacramental presence, not even a kiss. Life had risen high, run over, and the part that was spilled passed down and melted into the light on that holly-bush. And then, though the sun had not gone, the colour was there no longer; the bush became cold and as the others, the fire went out; and as Anthonie and Petronel watched the sacred embers dying, and the berries darkening one by one, they clung to each other again, frightened no longer, but full of happiness and hope, as those who had been shown the Sacrament of the resurrection of life, who had opened the gates of a grave prepared to shudder at the corpse, and had found instead, neither death, nor yet decay, but a living child, with wonder of the world in its young eyes.

BLESSING OF THE RING

BLESSING OF THE RING

THERE must be joy of life in June, or not at all. They who are sad then must keep their sadness, but let them not walk in the way of lovers. There was joy upon little Widdecombe in the moor, happy Widdecombe, not yet famous in legend as the dwelling-place of the devil, nor consumed by lightning and fire-balls; no shadow yet of the awful day when the priest was to be dragged from his moorland home, to be hanged and quartered for the sin of obeying the voice of God rather than the voice of a devil. No man then living was to see that day. It was peaceful in the vale of Widdecombe, cut off from the world by the heaving moor, and its rude folk were happy because they knew no other life. Few even of the old had travelled more than a dozen miles away. Sir Robert alone had passed through the gates of Exanceaster, as Exeter was then called. There was joy, because it was the eve of St. Boniface, and Anthonie and Petronel were to be married in the morning.

See them walking in the valley for the last time separated. On St. Boniface's day they would be made one altogether, two bodies and one flesh, joined by that awful presence, which seemed to them both alive and thrilling in the midst of the incense, when Sir Robert muttered it down and into being. Ah, but they were ignorant, these pretty children. They knew not how to write or read those twisted letters in the psalter. They had but a few words which they kept on using. They would run after the priest like babies, to hold his hands, and steal a blessing from him. They knew that God was good, that He lived partly in a place called heaven, and partly in the white dove which quivered before the altar, and they knew that if they offended Him their marriage would be stopped by

lightning. What else? They knew how to love. It was a mighty power in their healthy bodies; not a gentle flower-like thing in that June sunshine, but something stronger, half savage, like the rivers as they had been during winter, tearing away obstacles with white flood-water. In December love had been like the song of a bird at evening; in April as the flight of a butterfly; in May it was a hunger and thirst. And now upon the eve it was a kind of death, a feeling that life was over, and a restless sleep beginning; a forgetfulness of the world of fighting and disease, for they were almost out of it, and could not remember they had to go back: a vision of a spiritual life beyond, among golden clouds; and yet all the time this earthly life was gnawing them, and they had to be away from others, eating their own food of each other's breath, adoring fair skin and soft hair, biting the tips of fingers, sighing and moaning like two gentle breezes meeting round the turret of the tower. Forgive them if they knew only one thing well. For they were wise.

It was evening, the first shadows were crossing, when Sir Robert, walking in his garden, lifted up his eyes and saw the children of his thoughts approaching, with the glory and shyness of new life upon their faces. It was a time for whispering: there was too much mystery in the air for declamation, the church would not like to hear laughter, and there is a form of happiness which is beyond it and brings tears. The place was solemn, so were the young flowers asleep, Petronel also hung her head, and there was little colour on her face; for the great Mother was so near, and she knew that Sir Robert had been walking hand in hand with God through the garden, recommending Anthonie and herself to His love.

"The ring, my Father," said Anthonie, holding it out.

A plain and simple thing, made not of gold but of silver, because silver was by the Church accounted purer than gold, and being pure it signified the inward affection which ought

ever to be fresh between husband and wife. Sir Robert took it, let it drop into the hollow of his hand, and whispered, "Come, my children. "

The ring was then unworthy to be worn by a bride, because it was a thing cursed by Satan, who hates lovers; it might contain some spell, the evil eye might have overlooked it, and, like any inanimate object which was to be applied to a sacred purpose, it had to be sanctified, in order that the evil spirit then possessing it might be driven out.

It was very soothing in the church; around it winds murmured, but they seemed far away. The lamp before the pyx looked like a star to guide the wanderers home. The children knelt and signed themselves, Sir Robert passed to the vestry, and soon they stood beside the stoup of holy water, the priest holding the ring with the first three fingers of his right hand—so precise were the rubrics—and on each side of him Anthonie and Petronel stood holding a lighted candle, which gave all the light to the world that was needful for the short and simple ceremony. There was a versicle and response, two short prayers, twice was the ring blessed and signed; and then Sir Robert took a little holy water which he sprinkled upon it, and the miracle was accomplished. Henceforth the ring would be holy, proof against all enchantments and the wiles of the devil; nor would any act of its wearer suffice to make it again a thing of evil, for the ring once blessed remained holy for ever.

SOLEMNISATION

SOLEMNISATION

THE sun was weak, the day still wet, when the bells began; and there was a goodly mist upon the hills, like smoke of superstition before the rood concealing mysteries. Sweet smells were in the valley where old gardens made a fragrance, and already the air was humming with work-a-day bees; so who would not rise and be up ready for marriage, who could lie abed in that young June of red blood and blue sky, who would not hasten to be at the door, and see the white bride shimmering in the mist?

Anthonie, before the night was out, ran often to the door to wish the clouds away. Sir Robert awoke like a bird at the first light: the service was early, for the people had their work, and it was necessary for him to take it fasting. Ask not of Petronel. She has been toying with white garments for an hour or two, lying hidden like a dove in a wood, murmuring a litany, and with little gasps of fear clutching a fylfot cross that swung as a charm from her neck.

There was not much music: only children singing as they waited for the bride, while the old sun, thinking he was to be worshipped again, came out and searched for his altars on the hill-top. Sir Robert, wise priest to choose a June morning, left his house, beheld the churchyard full, and perhaps sighed, considering how soon the summer went with life and youth, how soon Anthonie and Petronel, children as they were, would stand no longer over, but with him under, while others just as eager would be over them waiting for child-brides then unborn; but the mother would live on, and the immortal mysteries of the altar, so he thought, and was happy to be no prophet, happy not to see the altars overthrown, the sacred lamp extinguished, the church a dry shell humming with cold wind,

and matrimony the sport of law-courts. It was the age of ignorance, and he was satisfied; and if there was a shadow on that morning it would be cast by the thought that here was the ending of a romance, nothing to others, but so great to them; for marriage is an ending, the end of youth, of that wild, restless struggle with hot life, a beginning of peace and better things; and the joining together of two he had baptised must surely remind Sir Robert that his own change was not a great way off.

The bells ceased. Children were still singing softly, not heeding much the words, for their eyes were busy, while their elders murmured, and the very old were garrulous with whispers. Petronel was coming, surrounded by her relations. An anxious time for her and them. Spells of witchcraft were in the air, the evil one was doing his utmost to mar her happiness, the eye of the smallest child in that assembly might prove disastrous. Nobody must see her face, not even the bridegroom, for Satan might put some evil thought into his heart, and it might be cast from his eyes upon the bride, and take effect before she became one with him. Even the glances of admiration might have been dangerous had they fallen upon a face uncovered. Therefore she was hidden by the bridal veil, a custom which has survived, and in an unlearned age has been explained as necessary to hide the blushes of the bride.

The ordeal of passing between the people was over, and they stood together before the door of the church, as the rubric required, before the face of the Mother Church, in the presence of God, the priest, and the people; and Anthonie stood at the right side of Petronel, not as a sign of his superiority as a man, but because Eve was formed from a rib taken out of the left side of Adam. Sir Robert gazed about him, and began to speak, not in priestly Latin, but in the old mother tongue:

"Brethren, we are gathered together in the sight of God

and His angels, and all the saints, in the face of the Church, to join together two persons, to wit, this man and this woman——"

He paused, and folding his arms looked upon them, as he was bound to do, in order that he might know them if God called to him at any time, and said, "Who are these that you have joined together in My Name?" He saw the fine eyes of Anthonie, the drooping head of Petronel, and he smiled and put out a hand as if he would caress them; for they were his children, and he loved them.

"That whatsoever they may have done aforetime, henceforth they may be one body yet two souls, in the faith and law of God."

He turned and charged the people sternly, that if any of them knew any cause why Anthonie and Petronel could not lawfully make contract of matrimony, he should declare it; and the same charge he made to the two children: that if they had done aught secretly, or made any vow or knew any impediment, they should at once confess it; but he hardly stayed for an answer, knowing more of their lives than any man living. And turning himself about, he asked, "What dower has this woman?" smiling again as he referred to the slight, trembling figure with that stately term.

It was time for Petronel's father to look up and mutter of the ponies, the good cow, the linen, and some few articles of furniture, which were to be his daughter's contribution to the home: useful articles, but no money. Little of that was known, and little was needful. The answer was sufficient, although the question was formal—had not Petronel gone over every item with Sir Robert many a time? And so he turned to the bridegroom, and asked in his gentle English voice:

"Anthonie, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife; wilt thou love, honour, hold and cherish her, in health and in sickness, as a husband should a wife, and, forsaking all

other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Not a moment passed before the answer came, "I will."

The time of probation was over, sickness and death had been avoided, and the last effort of the winter conquered. Here was the reward coming after those weeks of doubtings and fears, lest the day might never come, of horror in the dark weeks lest God should forbid the banns and not allow such happiness this side heaven. Everything had been conquered, even self, during those days of warm winds and pale primroses; and now the joy and the light and the colour of life and the years were at their full, and the mists of the morning were streaming from the tors.

"Petronel, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband; wilt thou obey and serve him; love, honour, and cherish him in health and sickness, as a wife should a husband, and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him so long as ye both shall live?"

The answer was inaudible, but Sir Robert guessed the words shaped by her quivering lips, and his own moved in the form of a benediction. The child dreams, he thought, and was not wrong, for Petronel was in her soul within the church, struggling towards that dove behind the lamp, imploring the mystery to give them time, much time, love and yet more love, year after year, kiss after kiss, embrace upon embrace, no cooling, no end, no death: a miracle, if it were possible to that miracle; only let them live, let them live June after June, and not die; keep the shadows away and the Holy Chrism from their door; and let not the candles be lighted and the Black Mass muttered for them, for they were so young, and the miracle was so old, yet fresh every day, and, if it would, it could keep them, like itself, alive.

Her hand was being lifted by her father, her little white hand, which was uncovered because she was a maid; and this little hand was given to Sir Robert, as if it had not been hers

to dispose of; and the old priest held it for a few moments in his warm grasp, feeling it gently moving and throbbing, and pressing his fingers round it reassuringly, before he passed it into the right hand of Anthonie, eager to receive it that he might give his bride the troth, saying after Sir Robert presently in the soft old English words:

"I, Anthonie, take the Petronel, to my wedded wyf, to have and to holde fro this day forwarde, for better for wors, for richere for poorer, in sykenesse and in hele, tyl dethe us departe, if holy chyrche it woll ordeyne, and therto I plight the my trouthe."

The hands withdrew, only for a moment, that the sensation of touch and the joy of union might be renewed, and this time by Petronel. Now it was Anthonie's right hand that came to hers, brought to its happy home by the priest, who was beginning to murmur those words which she had by heart, like all maids, matrons, or widows, near and far. She still trembled, but not with fear, more as the flower fluttering in sunshine at the pleasant touch of a breeze; and the small, childish voice was clear, even to the old folk, who had their hands behind their ears, leaning forward to listen and think and have their dream of memory:

"I, Petronel take the Anthonie, to my wedded housbonder, to have and to holde fro this day forwarde, for better for wors, for richere for poorer, in sykenesse and in hele, to be bonere and buxum in bedde and at the borde, tyl dethe us departe, if holy chyrche it woll ordeyne, and therto I plight the my trouthe."

Again the hands were withdrawn. All fear was at an end; life was theirs. Face to face they stood before the priest, the church, and the great Absent One, there nevertheless, and saw the world idealised, each tree and leaf, mountain and river, an emblem of the heaven beautiful; not things of the earth, not common types of landscape, but bound up with their souls,

their feelings, and their eyes, into the form, colour, and life of that new spiritual state which was theirs. All material things melted into the blessed vapour of holy incense, taking a new shape, making a new earth, theirs, and for them alone. Their hands felt, and their eyes saw, nothing tangible, even the rocks became made of cloud-stuff, the trees were sacraments, the sacred fire of the lamp, the holy water, were protecting angels. There was no separation by death. All things in Nature were joined together, and all the powers of darkness combined could not part them asunder. Real life was theirs, not the outward form alone, but the inward and spiritual part, visible then to their eyes, as the veil, which had covered the hitherto unseen earth of God and the garden which He had planted, dropped, and all things fashioned upon the six days stood forth revealed, surrounded with that flame and vapour of the Sacramental elements divine; and beyond, far beyond earth and sea, where surely no mortal eye had ever reached before, were still more luminous expanses, passing from infinite wonders of a new daylight, into a succession of twilights, through all manner of clouds, making music as they shifted, and tinted cities of the saints; and so at last into the eternity, where there was still a promise of life, more happiness and divine passion, more matrimony, for a lamp was burning far away in the infinite before the great altar of the home of wonder and of love.

Stories increased about the enchanted lovers, tales of the woods, rivers, and flowers, making phantoms of the wedding-guests, leaving but one figure clear, the vested body and calm face of the old father who had wafted over them the spirit of enchantment. Bride had been united to bridegroom, earth had been joined to heaven, spirit had been wedded to matter, and the issue of these marriages were gods; so that the trees were no longer vegetable growths, but dryads, the hills were oreads, the wood where they had walked and trembled was a

nymph, and the river was an angel with long hair. All matter became absorbed by symbolism, with a sympathy and fellowship for matrimony; leaves and stems, blossoms and fruit, running water and granite hills, were spirits singing a love song, and clustering with benediction round the bridal veil.

Thus mortal children put on immortality. Not for them the ravines and chasms, where waters roared in perpetual twilight, those horrible dark noondays, the obscured moons, and dusks of deep forest roads where fungi grew and reptiles squatted. Such things were not for matrimony; the veil and fylfot cross defended the bride and him she loved against them. Theirs were the meadow of myrtle and the fields of golden flowers, where they would wander hand in hand and heart in heart beside the blue and the green of whispering streams, beneath the sycamores, the rowans, and white birches, waiting for the grain to ripen and the fruit to form, watching the scented breezes blowing the long grasses up and down. Theirs were the blush of rose-thickets, the embroidery of honeysuckles, and the twining things of pink and white hiding themselves with green stuff, as if bashful of their beauty. And their home would be a fair garden blessed by St. Francis, planted with all manner of fragrant herbs, and sanctified by angels' visits.

A dream, but who would break it? Who would sweep away symbolism and restore the storm, terror of the sword, and heartache? Not Sir Robert, as he put forward a dish to receive the offerings, gold, silver, and the ring which had been blessed; all for the bride, the gold and silver for the needs of this world, the ring for her soul. Sir Robert took it, and Anthonie receiving it from him with the first three fingers of his right hand, and holding in his left Petronel's right hand, spoke after the priest the words:

"With this rynge I the wed, and this gold and silver I the

geve; and with my body I the worshipe, and with all my worldely cathel I the endowe."

And then he placed the ring upon the thumb of his bride, still holding it, and presently beginning the invocation he removed it, at the name of the Father to the first finger, at the name of the Son to the second, and at the name of the Holy Ghost to the third. And there he was to leave it, because in that finger the Church believed was a certain vein which reached to the heart.

With bowed heads they stood, while Sir Robert lifting up his hand, made the sign of the cross over them, and in the name of the Lord who made the world out of nothing, blessed their union. Then followed the sixty-eighth psalm, which was said, not sung, ordinary versicles and the Lord's Prayer, more versicles and responses; and then Sir Robert completed the ceremony at the door with another blessing, one complete and full, covering their lives upon earth and through eternity, the chief of the blessings, apart from the great Sacramental benediction which was to come, and could be given only by the Host. Drawing himself up, with the same tender smile, Sir Robert extended both his hands over the bowed heads, and as he slowly made the sign of their redemption, said in a loud clear voice in the Latin tongue:

"God the Father bless you; Jesus Christ keep you; the Holy Ghost enlighten you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be merciful unto you; turn His countenance unto you and give you peace; and so fill you with all spiritual benediction for the remission of your sins, that ye may have eternal life and live for ever."

BENEDICTION

BENEDICTION

THE Father had finished. It was now time for Mother Church to make two one with magic. Before the people Anthonie and Petronel were man and wife, but in the sight of the Church they were not united until they had been presented at the altar, heard Mass, received the spiritual food and benediction. The Mass and the blessing; these were the powers by which the Church ruled every heart and life, making the altar the very centre of human existence in those rude days, when the home was very simple and the thread of life most weak. There was but one service—the Mass; all other ceremonies were a part of the one, a preliminary to the sacrifice; matrimony belonged to the order of the Mass, the burial of the dead followed Mass, and through all rang the fine clear note of blessing. Obscured by rites the ceremonies might be, darkened with all manner of words, but out of the mist simplicity emerged—the magic of consecration and the sign of the cross; so much and no more, except curses, which were rare and too terrible for use. It was a blessing that the people asked for; for that they waited at the door of the church in the early morning, for that they neglected every duty of the world, for that the knight and the statesman sought the cloister. Without that blessing they could not live and dared not die. And the Church was lavish, she could not bless enough, she endured to bless; and the people loved her because she was then a church of love.

Twice had the young couple been blessed at the door, six times before the Mass began they were to be blessed at the altar, as a preliminary to the Sacramental blessing which secured the marriage bond; and in their own home more blessings must be bestowed upon them before the night began.

Sir Robert passed towards the rood screen, saying the hundred and twenty-eighth psalm, the bride and bridegroom followed, while the congregation filled the seats with a gentle scuffling. The sun was well above the mists, fighting its way like a hero across the heights, putting the golden candlelight to shame, making a mystic haze about the altar, where dust floated, and a butterfly flickered. Out of these fiery beams of June came the voice of Sir Robert, slowly and solemnly bestowing the six blessings: the blessing of the God of Heaven, the blessing of the God of the Patriarchs, the blessing of the God of the Angels, the blessing of the God of Anthonie and Petronel, the blessing of the God of Adam and Eve, and the special blessing of the God of all Blessings. The richness of these blessings like the day of warmth, clear sky, and flowers seemed to fill the land with happiness and colour.

The Mass began: it was that ordained for Trinity Sunday, with a special memorial of the bride and bridegroom, referred to secretly as, "Thy servants whom Thou hast seen fit to bring to man 's estate and the day of espousal." The altar was covered with three linen cloths, of which one had been blessed, six candles of a pound weight each were lighted upon the beam above the altar, and two more before Our Lady's image; five smaller ones were lighted in a bronze corona before the step of the altar. The children were brought into the holy place, and set upon the south side, Petronel at Anthonie's right hand, between him and the altar, so that she might be protected upon either side, by the one who had sworn to devote his life and soul and the adoration of the body to her, and by the mysteries and the Presence lingering in the candle-light, the savour of incense, and the odour of flowers; protection in the highest. It was good there, and very warm with light of many kinds. There was no more loneliness, no longing, no need for that little red heart to pant for love. Perfection had been attained, there upon earth, which was not

earth then, but a chalice all made of gold and filled with what looked like fire, but did not burn; and through this element they moved, thrilling, gasping for joy, and in some wondrous way it made them one.

A cloud surrounded them. They were being censed with unblessed incense, being creatures of free-will, capable of sin, so that incense which had been blessed was not for them. The cloud hid the world from their sight, left them alone together in their own new heaven, surrounded them with the spiritual presence of saints and angels, and the fragrance of a June in paradise; and after that the blessing, for out of the smoke was to come a Figure to give them the peace and the promise of eternal life, to marry them, not for a day, nor for a life, but for all time; to make of their twin souls one instrument of music tuned to the song of angels, to add to them beauty, sweet-scented blossom and fair fruit, like the tree of the mountains, covered at that hour with a rich whiteness, as the king's daughter all glorious, the Yggdrasil, with its roots in the earth and its topmost branches in heaven, offering an oblation of small apples red as blood.

The Sanctus bell rang, the Canon had been reached; the two children, lost in wonder and amazement, saw the white folds of the Nuptial Veil. Like creatures of a dream they knelt at the step of the altar, and the order was to pray, but they could not: all the few simple words they knew were far away, their thoughts were confused; they could only murmur "My wife," or "My husband"; they could only ask, "Bless Anthonie," or "Bless Petronel," and could only add, "Let us live, O God, let us live." And while thus kneeling and bowed together, they were conscious of the veil being drawn over them, and held at the four corners, like a cloud of glory out of which they were to pass transfigured; there while they knelt, Sir Robert, no longer the tender father, but the awful priest, who could lead them into heaven or spurn them into

hell, was muttering the words of enchantment which would draw that Figure down to bless them. They were conscious that the miracle was accomplished, they felt the silence, they knew when the Eucharistic Fracture was being made, they heard at last the Peace being given; and while they quivered like the folds of the Nuptial Veil on this, the supreme moment which could never come again, for the Sacramental Blessing was not bestowed on second marriages, the Figure was before them, with a voice, "Bow down yourselves for a blessing." And as they knelt in their white spiritual bed, half fainting with fear and love, intoxicated by the sun, the incense, and the Presence, swaying there, hand clasped in hand beneath the pall, the blessing of the Three Pieces of God upon the paten came:

"O God, Who by Thy mighty power madest all things out of nothing; Who also, after other things set in order, didst create for man, made after the image of God, the inseparable help of the woman, that out of man's flesh women should take her beginning, teaching that what Thou hast been pleased to make one it should never be lawful to put asunder.

"O God, Who hast consecrated the state of matrimony to such an excellent mystery, that in it is signified the sacramental union and marriage of Christ and the Church.

"O God, by Whom woman is joined to man, and the union, instituted in the beginning, is gifted with that blessing which alone has not been taken away, either through penalty of original sin or the judgment of the deluge; look graciously, we beseech Thee, on this Thine handmaid now to be joined in wedlock, who earnestly desireth to be guarded by Thy protection. Let the yoke of love and peace be upon her; let her be faithful and chaste; let her wed in Christ, and ever remain a follower of holy matrons. Let her be loving to her husband as Rachel, wise as Rebecca, long-lived and faithful as Sara. Let not the father of lies get advantage over her

through her doings; let her abide in the bond of faith and precept; being wedded to one man, let her flee all unlawful conversation, and fortify her weakness with the strength of discipline. Let her be grave and bashful, severe and modest, well-instructed in heavenly doctrine. Let her be fruitful in child-bearing, well reported of, and innocent, and attain to a desired old age, seeing her children's children unto the third and fourth generation, and finally attaining unto the rest of the blessed and the Kingdom of Heaven."

THE KISS

NO power of Church or State could separate them now. The Nuptial Veil was removed, and they rose to their feet, still before the altar, for one ceremony remained, a pure act of love, a token of bodily devotion. The Church permitted, more, demanded it. They could not leave the holy place until God, the priest, and the people had been assured of their affection one for the other. The bride had yet to receive the Sacramental Kiss.

Not a kiss of Anthonie, no lover's kiss, nor that of a husband; he could not give it: he could only give what he had: he must receive it, take it from God this once, and let his wife have it as her own. Here was Sir Robert turning towards him, with lips which the chalice had wetted, and hands which had broken the Host outstretched; hands which had done no violence, lips which had kissed no woman other than a mother, and every day were pressed to holy things, altar, text, vessels, relics, nothing lower. He came through the sunshine, with the gift that had fallen like a star upon his mouth from the centre of life. He came in tenderness, as a man, a priest, and a God, three in one. Upon Anthonie's shoulders he placed his hands, and as a man looked into his eyes and smiled a little, thinking of the years behind as he saw the boy stand straight and tall with courage on his face, saw the clean limbs and remembered the child who had been brought to him for baptism, the child he had trained, whose growth he had watched, whose rash impulses he had checked; and as a priest he sighed, thinking of the years to come, the sorrows and the storms, that figure bent, its head frosted, its tongue foolish; and as a God he bent his head and kissed him; then turned aside to pray.

Petronel was ready with uplifted veil and blushing face exposed. Now she was married, and sanctified, no charm could work. She put out her hands; they were seized. She held up her face: for the first time Anthonie saw the lips of a wife. They had passed through great moments, but this, surely this, was the chiefest. They saw each other, they recognized each other, not as Anthonie and Petronel, boy and girl, not as lovers, but as husband and wife in the sight of earth and heaven. They were married. Not an act could be too simple, for every act was new. Matrimony, was it not rather second baptism, regenerating both, a baptism of beauty and of strength, making Petronel an angel of loveliness, and Anthonie a hero of the Sun? They had been born again, not to sorrow, but to the life beautiful: happiness was heaped upon happiness by that gentle magic of the church. They were small children once again, little people of a tale, created to play with sunshine and the mist, and to dance on the mountain-top, creatures who linked the life they knew of with the land of sunset dreams.

And what if all this should be a fairy-tale? They were only boy and girl, they were not new forms: millions of others had married, and would marry, of the same form, and differing from them in name alone. That supernatural door stood before all, and every hand, if it willed, could take the golden key: self-same creatures, borrowing nothing from life but names, leaving merely such a record in the register as: "June 5th. Anthonie Byland and Petronel Layne," until the leaf fell to pieces and was lost, and with it their poor lives.

Surely the enchantment would remain, the glamour would be handed on, the story of their love would be repeated; and in that they would endure, and by the kiss become immortal. Only false love would die and be forgotten; the glitter and tinsel of mere passion made the fairy-tale, and that would recede from human view and be lost to sight, while the magnificent

realism of their matrimony would live for ever in the drifting mists and solemn twilights, in the echoes of the mountains, and in all the spirit forms of June. No woman could love in vain, nor could any man marry in vain; for every meeting of two hearts made more light in the universe, more stars in space, more lamps beyond.

So their lips came together, and man did eat angels' food before the altar; and with that kiss the doors flew open, and they saw the spirit realm by the added sense of that first contact as man and wife; even as a poet sometimes in blindness touches an image which sweeps aside the barriers and lets him in, or releases the flood of light behind. And they knew that the doors could only remain open while they loved; a quarrel might close them, one bitter word would lock them, and the spiritual vision would fade away; and matrimony, which had opened them, would be over; and the golden keys of the blessing and Nuptial Kiss could not be theirs again.

The Mass of matrimony was a Mass of optimism, a Mass of blessing. Love must triumph against fate, the children thus blessed must be happy; they could not fail to win the greatest of all prizes here if their kiss was true. They would be lovers not born for death; their lives would be written in the literature of heaven; they would walk in a path, unsubstantial apparently, like the Milky Way across the sky, or the track of moonlight upon water, there every year, and every age, and always new. Without that nuptial kiss from the heart and soul, the kiss of optimism, the seal upon the bond of matrimony, and without the love that it inspires, nothing that is lovely in all Nature could remain, each life would be a history of shadows, a tale not worth the telling, each day an empty echo, and earth would be joined to heaven, no more with sunbeams, but by a web of hopeless dreams.

Bread and water were brought, blessed by Sir Robert, and offered to the bride and bridegroom that they might par-

take of the necessities of the body, which, taken moderately, would make them "discreet, sober, and undefiled." Even as the loaves in the wilderness and the waterpots in Cana were blessed, in order that they who received the spirit of life into their hearts and homes should neither hunger nor thirst.

THE NIGHT

THE NIGHT

MOONLIGHT spread along the vale of Widdecombe, putting all things to sleep, and the spirits of the wind were kind that night, withdrawing themselves, as if so ordered, that there might be peace for the lovers. Hardly a sound passed over the quivering moor as Sir Robert stepped forth, a long dark cloak, somewhat threadbare by day, covering his surplice, an office-book beneath his arm, a vessel containing holy water between his hands. Such a still night was rare in that tempestuous valley; there was no need of candlelight, for the moon served, a gracious light untroubled by gusts or noise of falling water. Moths flickered about the old priest, and around his white head stirred the fragrance from his garden; for he loved the flowers, and grew what he could, roses and honeysuckle, and sweet gillyflowers.

He stood a moment to gaze into the beautiful night, and half unconsciously he blessed it, lifting the holy water vessel, and with it making the sign of the cross upon the flowers and moonlight, murmuring, "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost bless you, fragrant flowers, bless you, pale moon." His was a life of blessing, a life wedded to benediction, and somehow it was not a failure.

He passed along the road, and came at last to the new home. The door was open ready to receive him, and a faint light within guided him to the foot of the narrow stairs. Bowing his head, he bestowed upon the little stone-built cot the Peace,then ascended and entered the marriage chamber, not as a man, but as a priest.

Anthonie and Petronel were waiting, and when he appeared they knelt. It was all very simple; the floor covered

with crisp brown fern, no ceiling, only the oak beams and thatch of reeds above, no fireplace; the window was made of lattice-work; but one of the walls was hung with painted cloth, a rich and unusual possession for a small country home. Against that wall appeared the bed, severely plain, a completely furnished bed being accounted a luxury; rough sheets, hard pillows, and coverlet, nothing more, for night-robes were unknown. Beneath the window an oak chest containing the household linen; one chair, a wooden stool, a rough table bearing a cross, two candlesticks, and a wealth of flowers to make an altar, without which this civilised home would have ranked with the huts of the wild savages upon the moor. Two candles, which had been blessed, were lighted ready for the ceremony. It was a pure chamber, fresh with the presence of youth, sweet with the breath of flowers, consecrated by love and made holy by the presence of the priest.

"The Lord be with you," said Sir Robert softly.

"And with Thy spirit," they answered him.

The priest lifted his hand, and with the power of his enchantments drove away from that chamber all evil spirits and the powers of darkness, saying:

"Bless, O Lord, this chamber and all that dwell therein, that they may be established in Thy peace and stand fast in Thy will, and live and grow in Thy love, and let the length of their days be multiplied."

The bride and the bridegroom knelt beside the bed. Sir Robert moved towards them and putting out his hands, committed the bed to the mercy and protection of the Giver of life, signing and sanctifying it, using these words:

"Bless, O Lord, this couch, Thou Who neither slumberest nor sleepest; Thou Who keepest Israel, keep Thy servants who rest in this bed from all phantoms and illusions of devils; keep them waking, that they may meditate on Thy precepts; keep them sleeping, that in their slumber they may have a

sense of Thee; and let them here and everywhere be defended by the aid of Thy protection."

And then Anthonie and Petronel turned towards their loving old father; and he, with tears in his eyes, gave them the last of those abundant blessings.

"God bless your bodies and your souls, my children, and send a blessing upon you as He blessed Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

"The hand of the Lord be upon you, dear children, and let Him send His holy angel to keep and comfort you all the days of your life.

"The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost bless you, dearly beloved children, Trine in number, One in Name."

And then he sprinkled them with holy water three times, and departed into the moonlit night, his gentle eyes still wet; and so to his home to pray again for all those who loved one another, for all those who feared God, and especially for those whom he had joined together that bright June day in Holy Matrimony.

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